A Chaplain's Testimony

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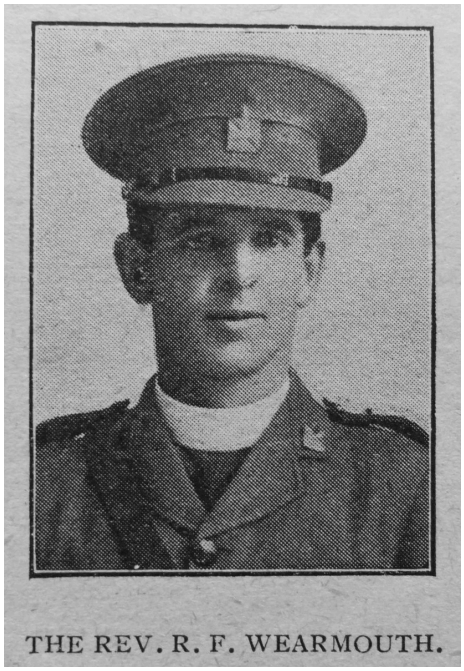
THE REV. R. F. WEARMOUTH.

THERE are many things interesting and inspiring in connection with one's work among the soldiers, and especially amongst those at the Front. In fact, all the work of the Chaplain, whether social or religious, is interesting and inspiring, both to himself and the lads among whom he labours.

First and foremost his work is spiritual, although the social takes up a large part of his time and energies. His chief task is to present the Gospel of the Lord Jesus in such a way so as to help the lads to appreciate readily its value and accept its principles. None can deny the importance of complete acceptance of the Gospel, and especially for those who are constantly in the valley of death. One cannot spend three years at the Front without learning, or having re-emphasised, some truths of the Gospel.

One truth that is constantly being re-emphasised is that:—
1. The preaching of the Gospel is independent of time and place. John Wesley and Whitefield and our forefathers demonstrated this truth to the world. 'The same truth has been taught over and over again in France and other lands. It is common knowledge in the Army that the Padre is expected to make all his own arrangements for services. In the early days of the War most of the services were held in the open air. In the latter days the services were held chiefly in huts and tents. It would be extremely interesting to our folks at home to hear the various experiences of their ministers with regard to the different places where they have unfolded the Gospel. Speaking for myself, I remember quite vividly some of the strange places where God was made manifest.

My first service was held in a village school just behind the line, and well within reach of the shells. In fact, during the service, a good number of shells passed overhead. My first Christmas service was held in a beer-house in a front-line village, and rather than be without a service for that day, we decided to go to the place where beer was sold. In the days of 1915 and 1916 most of our services were held in broken houses and barns. I remember one November morning, having no sheltered place but an old barn that was used as a butcher's shop. I decided, with the consent of the butchers, to have service there. They were wise men, the butchers, for they varied their work so as not to interfere with the service. During the singing they used the chopper; and while we prayed and spoke they used the knife. So we got through the work without hindering each other.

Another morning service that I remember vividly was one in which we were compelled to move our position three times because the Germans began shelling the place where we stood. In the same village, a few weeks before that memorable morning, I had announced the evening service to take place in a certain orchard, but two hours before service time the Germans began shelling the place

where we decided to go. Luckily the shelling ceased just before service time, and we had a good meeting and a good attendance. One June Sunday evening, living with the lads in the trenches and dug-outs, I talked to some of them about the advisability of having a service, and most of them said it would be fine to have one. Not being able to gather in the open for fear of being observed by the enemy, we decided to have service in a shell-hole. And even in the shell-hole God manifested Himself, and blessed us according to our need. Not many Sundays after that, we had service in a dug-out about forty feet under the ground. One cannot attend services in such places without feeling that the preaching of the Gospel is independent of time and place.

Another truth that experience has emphasised is that:—
2. The Gospel is necessary to the soldier. For many reasons the soldier needs the Gospel. It helps him in many ways. One cannot understand the awful conditions in the front line unless one has actually lived there. The conditions are so hard that the temptations to depression and dismay receive a new strength. The lads need the Gospel to save them from these temptations. The Gospel cheers and strengthens; above all, it makes men brave. One day in the October of 1915, going my round in the trenches, I came across a young man whom I spoke to for a time. In the course of our conversation, he said, looking over the top towards the German barbed wire: “I am not afraid to go over there If my officer wants me to go now, or to-night, or any time, I won’t be afraid. I know that God will be with me.”

During the preliminary bombardment of the Somme battle, I went to see a friend in the front line. I remained two hours with him. He told me what he had to do on the Saturday. Before I left I asked him how he felt. He replied: “I don’t fear the Saturday; I’ve lived a clean life in the past; I’ve got no regrets; I know that God will help me, so I’m not afraid.” Another young man the same night told me he was looking forward to the battle as if it were a football match. The last time I saw him going to the line he was full of hope and confidence. There was not a trace of fear in his speech or countenance. He died a hero on the battlefield. A similar kind of bravery has revealed itself among the lads in the hospitals. One day, going my rounds in a certain casualty clearing station, I came across a lad who was nigh unto death. I knelt beside him, and asked if there was anything I could do for him. He said: “Yes, I should like you to pray for me.” So I prayed, and then asked if there was anything else I could do. He said: “Yes, I should like you to write to my parents.” So I took the address and asked if there was anything he would like me to say. “Yes,” he said, “tell them I’m not afraid to die.” It needs a great deal of courage to say “I’m not afraid to die.” The Gospel provides men with such courage.

After living with the lads at the Front for a time, one learns why the martyrs of olden days faced persecution and death so bravely. The Gospel had supplied them with the necessary grace. Those who accept the Gospel among the soldiers find it is still the power of God, and a power that helps them in all their needs. We have proved the Gospel.

References

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